

An Alleged “Lost Gospel”

On 13 March 1997 *The Chronicle* carried an article that suggested that fragments of a “lost Gospel” could shed light on the origins of Christianity. It was said to contain conversations between Jesus Christ and His disciples.

Paul Merecki, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, said that he was confident that the text was an authentic early account of the teachings of Christ. The manuscript (fifteen pages) was discovered in Berlin’s Egyptian Museum. It was written in the Coptic language. The article should have pointed out that there were a number of other apocryphal Gospels. It did point out that in 1945 the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas was discovered in Egypt. Up till fairly recently most knowledge about Gnosticism came from orthodox Christians who attacked them, like Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. Recent finds at Nag Hammadi have confirmed that Gnostics were wildly heretical. This body of literature also contained another “Gospel”, called “The Gospel of Truth.”

Strange claims were made in the newspaper article. One was that the text indicates that the origins of Christianity were more diverse than historians have described.

No one need be concerned that somehow he has been missing out on important parts of the Christian Gospel. From what the article said about the contents it is clear that it was a Gnostic text. The article wrongly suggested that Gnostics were persecuted to the point of death. In fact, Gnostics were generally not prepared to suffer martyrdom for their views.

There is a considerable gap in church history up until about 200 AD in Egypt. From one of the first Christian writers, Clement of Alexandria, who taught at the catechetical school there, and from the writings of Origen, it is clear that there were many Gnostics in Egypt, and orthodox Christians often felt inferior to them. Gnostics liked to present themselves as an elitist group that sought the true knowledge about the way of “salvation”, and suggested that orthodox Christians only operated on the level of faith, which they presented as something on a far inferior level.

Their basic teachings can be summarised in about twelve points. One of the chief points was their attempt to account for the existence of evil in the universe. They gave a cosmological account for evil in the world. To them, the created world and all matter, including the human body, were evil. The ultimate good and absolutely transcendent God was distinct from the “creator” of the world, who was supposed to have generated the world during a lapse. Because they viewed the human body as evil, there were two important consequences: one was that a genuine incarnation would have been impossible for Jesus Christ, and the other was that if they spoke of a “resurrection” it could not be one that would involve the human body.

They were heavily interested in astrology. They operated with names that had values that added up to numbers like eight (a week) and 365. They thought of a series of “aeons”, angels, or spiritual creatures, as buffers between this wicked world and the ultimate good God. Some Gnostics even gave names like “Jesus” and “Christ” to some of these supposed “aeons.” Some Gnostics like Valentinus thought of a series of male and female aeons according to the grammatical gender of words in the Greek language.

They were determinists. They said that there were three kinds of human beings. Some were spiritual, and would eventually find their way back through the aeons to the ultimate God, with whom their spirits had some affinity. However, they had to learn a number of passwords to utter at different stages of their ascent. They said that some human beings were entirely of matter, and for them no salvation was possible. The third class was people of “soul”, and it was possible for them to go either way.

For them, salvation did not come through faith in a redeemer, but through knowledge of what they considered to be the true state of affairs.

Because they thought of the human body as evil, there were two current attitudes. One was that a true Gnostic had to deny marriage, and fast frequently. Others took the opposite view, and argued that, because the body would have no part in salvation, it didn’t matter how wickedly anyone misused his body, because the body would not share in salvation anyhow.

The Gnostics claimed to have access to special secret traditions, and that is where their supposed “Gospels” fit in. Some people like Marcion, who held a number of Gnostic views, rejected the whole of the Old Testament, as coming from the evil “creator” God, and also cut out considerable parts of the New Testament.

In the New Testament itself there are evidences of opposition to early forms of Gnosticism. John in particular insisted that a true test was whether a teacher said that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. In Colossians Paul combated false teachings that had Gnostic affinities. He took over one of their words in

particular, “fullness”, which they used for the full number of divine creatures between God and the “*cosmos*.” Paul filled the word with Christian content, instead. John often uses the word “know”, as the Gnostics also did, but to him to “know” Christ means the same thing as to “believe” in Him. Paul’s letters contain some warnings about people who forbid marriage, and adopt ascetic principles that externally seem to have a form of religion.

The Christian teachers of the second century like Irenaeus and early third century writers reacted against Gnosticism by clarifying which writings they accepted as Scripture and which they did not. They insisted that God the Father was the creator of the universe, on the genuine incarnation of Jesus Christ, on the bodily resurrection at the last day, and on the real presence of Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament. Irenaeus made considerable effective use of the biblical contrast between Adam and Jesus Christ.

No one should imagine that there is anything in these Gnostic writings that he has been deprived of. They are heretical.

A person who reads this carefully will soon see features in our modern age that are similar to those of Gnosticism. Evolution can be considered as an attempt to give a cosmological explanation for the existence of evil. Liberals write about theology with a great appearance of knowledge, but lack the faith that the Scriptures call forth. Many assert that many of the words and works of Jesus Christ reported in the Scriptures were not genuine.